DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 263 369 CE 042 872

AUTHOR Macduff, Nancy; Long, James S.
TITLE Listening to Learners--A Key to Better Training.
PUB DATE Nov 85
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the National Adult Education Conference (Milwaukee, WI, November 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Education; *Adult Learning; Adult Students; *Instructional Design; *Instructional Improvement; Participant Satisfaction; *Student Attitudes; *Workshops

ABSTRACT

A project identified strategies to improve the design of workshops. Seventeen workshops were offered in 1984 by one training team, Macduff Bunt Associates, a management training company. The workshops were conducted throughout the Pacific Northwest for business and industry, nonprofit volunteer organizations, and government agencies. Workshop feedback sheets were assembled from 382 workshop participants who rated workshops and offered comments on ways to improve workshops. Of 185 comments, 27 related to content. Most content comments related to the workshop's specificity, scope of coverage or discussion, and relevance to a given setting. Respondents identified process elements of the workshops with comments related to time, choice of activities, physical activities, level of interaction, and instruction. Participants' emphasis on time and choice of activity within the process dimension of the workshops and on specificity and relevance indicated they held clear expectations for the workshop and viewed each activity as an alternative use of their time to pursue those expectations. Adult learners indicated dislike for being rushed, late hours as not being conducive to learning, a need to discuss real life problems, a desire for less group interaction and more instructor guidance, and a need to "mix up" the audience more than once. (YLB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED263369

Listening to Learners -- A Key to Better Training

Nancy Macduff, President
Macduff Bunt Associates
Walla Walla, Washington

and

James S. Long, PhD
Washington State University
Pullman, Washington

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. Long

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CE042872

Listening to Learners -- A Key to Better Training

Introduction

In educational workshops with adults, we frequently observe a minority who are displeased -- even though others praise the workshop. Seems like whatever facilitators do, "we just can't please all the people all the time."

We attempted to listen to that minority. We wanted to better understand the qualities or characteristics of workshop instruction that interfere with adult learning. Our goal was to identify strategies to improve the design of future workshops.

Our Procedures

First, we selected a set of 17 workshops offered in 1984 by one training team -- Macduff Bunt Associates -- a management training company headquartered in Walla Walla, Washington. The workshops were conducted throughout the Pacific Northwest for business and industry, non-profit volunteer organizations and government agencies. Participants included a wide cross section of adults -- men and women, college age to senior citizens, lay persons and professionals. Topics included, for example, Customer Relations, Recruiting Volunteers, Public Relations for Government Employees and Strategies to Help People Change Jobs.

Second, we assembled "Workshop Feedback Sheets" from 382 participants in the 1984 workshop series. We separated the sheets with a workshop rating of less than "very helpful," that is, a rating of "somewhat helpful," "not very helpful," or "useless." (see sample Workshop Evaluation Sheet)

Ratings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Ratings of Seventeen Workshops

Rating	Number	Percentage
Very Helpful	236	66.8
Somewhat Helpful	109	30.6
Not Very Helpful	9	2.5
Useless	0	0
Subtotal	353	99.9
No response:	29	

Note that no one rated any workshop "useless." That left a group of 118 ratings of less than "very helpful."

Third, we read written comments on those 118 sheets from respondents who rated the workshop less than "very helpful." The comments may have been written in response to any one of four questions:

a. What things did you find most useful in this workshop?

b. What did you find least helpful in this workshop?

c. What improvement would you suggest in this workshop?

d. Any other comments you would like to share?

These 118 respondents offered 185 comments which suggested that if the workshop were different it would have enhanced the learning for that respondent. At this point, the comment became our unit of analysis.

Fourth, we observed that some comments related to "process" and others to "content." "Content" comments were statements about subject matter. "Process" comments were statements about how the content was taught, method of facilitation, and teaching technique.

We let the statement itself categorize each comment. Independently, the two of us categorized the comments and then compared and agreed on our classification.

Findings

Of the 185 comments, 27 (about 15%) related to content. They are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Categories of Content Comments

Category	Number	Percentage
Specificity, relevance	17	63
Scope	7	26
Topic itself	3	11
Total	27	100

We observed that most content comments related to the workshop's specificity, scope of coverage or discussion, and relevance to a given setting, as in the work place.

Similarly, for "process" comments (85% of the total) we identified subcategories:

Table 3

Categories of Process Comments

Category	Number	Percentage
Time	66	41.7
Choice of Activities	60	37.9
Physical Activities	13	8.2
Level of Interaction	7	4.4
Instructions	7	4.4
Selections of Group Participants	5	3.1
Total	158	99.7

Respondents identified process elements of the workshops with comments related to a) time, b) choice of activities, c) level of interaction, d) selection of group members, e) instructions, and f) physical environment.

Thus, the comments themselves identified qualities or characteristics of workshops important to participants who rated workshops "somewhat helpful" or "not very helpful."

We noted, also, that some comments suggested possible new directions, for example, "less time on introductions," or "more of a mix of participants in small groups."

We found the comments helpful because they identified particular elements of workshop design and, sometimes, suggested a direction of change that, from the participants' perspective, would enhance their learning.

Discussion and Recommendations

Within the process dimension of the workshops, we were surprised to see the emphasis on "time" and "choice of activity," and the proportion of content comments that focused on "specificity and relevance." It seems that participants held clear expectations for the workshop, given their work setting, and viewed each activity as an alternative use of their time to pursue those expectations.

The adult learners noted the use of time in 41% of the process comments. They seemed to dislike being rushed through an activity or through the workshop. Activities not fully explained as to applicability were often criticized for taking too much time. Note was often made about the time of day or night, indicating that late hours are not conducive to learning. Several respondents asked for more time on the topic.

Another key issue relates to the type of activity selected. Participants expressed the need to discuss real life problems. Their suggestions ranged from having the instructor lecture more to keeping small group discussions on tasks as assigned.

Some participants did not want so much group interaction, but more from the instructor. Others shied away from the interaction of role playing. The proportion of comments in this category is congruent with current research on learning styles which indicates approximately 12% of adult learners do not feel they gain from interactive learning processes.

For some, a given activity was not useful. Other participants suggested the activity could have been adapted to be more useful -- use less time, use more time, use different questions, or develop a new format, such as a handout.

The mix of people in small groups was an area of concern. Another comment was the need to "mix-up" the audience more than once. Following the adult education theory that most adults seek assistance from others in their learning, it follows that the higher the number of participants providing meaningful interaction the greater the potential for learning.

When comments referred to scope and specificity in the learning environment, they were generally directed at instructions and explanation prior to an activity. The need to relate learning to back-home situations was mentioned frequently.

Dennis Prisk says, "... a successful program depends most of all on a jealous use of time."* This study of 118 adult learners supports that opinion and offers direction for individuals planning workshops that are self-contained with a time limit:

1. Provide an environment where adults take the responsibility themselves for learning content and applying it to their lives. Participants want a pattern of interaction where they can take charge of solving issues important to themselves. Time should be budgeted to best enhance adult learners' responsibility for their own problem solving.
2. Reduce the scope of content so that whatever is discussed is well connected to each participant's experience and situation.

*Dennis P. Prisk, "Conferencing as an Adult Learning Activity," Adult Leadership, May, 1977

3. Offer an array of capsules with material for individual follow-up.

4. Give clear instructions and explanations about an activity. Tell how this use of time is related to the course objectives and content. Let the learners know the objectives and how their time will be used in the workshop.

5. Recognize alternative uses of time that participants hold in their minds for the workshop as a whole and within each workshop activity.

In most adult learning groups we can expect that a minority of participants will not be so enthusiastic about learning in a small group setting as adult educators are for using this tool. Its utility seems related to the participants' perceptions of the relative ability of their peers and the instructor to help them deal with their back-home problems.

Process is important. So important that participants are quick to note when it delays their getting at the content. Changing our teaching methods and techniques may increase the potential for learning.

We can identify useful changes, we believe, by systematically listening to all participants.